

Weighted Grading Practice: Perceptions of the Effect

by High School Counselors

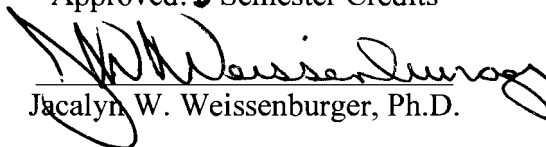
by

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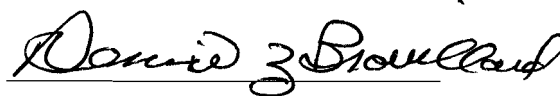
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ABSTRACT

The use of weighted grades in secondary education as a means to give credit for honors or advanced courses is common. Schools advocate for the use of weighted grading systems based on two primary concerns. First, students, parents, and educators recognize that honors type courses are challenging and believe grade adjustment, based on course difficulty, is appropriate. Second, it is thought that if grade adjustments are not made, these students may leave secondary education with a lower GPA and class rank than students who pursue regular classes. Thus, unweighted grading systems may negatively impact their ability to be admitted into selective post-secondary institutions.

A literature review indicates four primary findings. First weighted grading systems vary. Second, little research exists with regard to the prevalence of weighted grade systems. Third, the use of weighted grades can has been found to have either a positive or negative influence on students' GPAs or class ranks. Fourth, public and private post-secondary institutions appear to admit more students with transcripts with

weighted grades compared to those students whose transcripts were derived from unweighted grading systems.

In this study, the perceptions of a national sample of high school counselors about the prevalence and effects of weighted grading systems were investigated through survey research. Results of this research indicate the vast majority of high schools across the United States use weighted grades in 10 to 20% of their courses. These weighted grades are most commonly applied to Honors or Advanced Placement courses. To calculate weighted grades, the vast majority of high schools tend to use additive system forms of calculation. In addition, weighted grades tend to be identified as such on student transcripts giving post-secondary institutions the opportunity to make more informed admittance decisions.

Weighted grades were perceived to be fair and advantageous to both College-Bound and Gifted and Talented students. After considering previous research that found GPA and class rank are primary post-secondary admittance factors, combined with relevant research that concluded weighted grades tend to increase class rank and admission rates for College-Bound students, it can be concluded though this new research that high school counselors view weighted grades as a positive influence on the post-secondary admissions process.

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Chapter I: Introduction

Traditionally, entry into post-secondary educational institutions has been a competitive and often confusing prospect for high school students and their parents (Talley, 1989). For many applicants, the process of understanding what is important in this complex challenge often leads to differing conclusions. Students applying to post-secondary institutions can expect to be judged by many measures. These include, but are not limited to, class rank, grade point average (GPA), SAT/ACT scores, the overall strength of their secondary academic program, and involvement in extracurricular activities. Surveys of public and private colleges and universities across the United States indicate that class rank, program strength, and GPA have the greatest impact on a student's acceptance to an institution of higher learning, and these variables often are seen as the most accurate measures of a student's potential for post-secondary success (Breland, Maxey, Gernand, Cumming & Trapani, 2000).

When considering the importance of such measures, the issue of equity during the admission process by post-secondary institutions can be questioned; particularly in light of the ever-growing numbers of grading policies found in high schools across the nation. According to Fitzsimmons, Dean of Admissions at Harvard-Radcliffe University (cited in Lockhart, 1990, p. 9), "it is unfortunately true that there is no perfect system for reporting students' academic attainment." While school systems individually design and implement their own curriculum, they also design and control the grading systems used to evaluate student performance. School districts most commonly use letter and grade point awards for each course, but school districts elect to use different systems to report the academic achievement of their students. School districts further complicate their

reporting practices as they design and implement courses to meet the specific educational needs of students. These specialty courses can be classified into many categories including: gifted and talented, intellectually challenging, honors, advanced placement (AP), standard, basic, remedial, and independent. While such courses attempt to meet specific needs, they also allow students to “self-select into specific ability groupings for the purpose of individualizing educational programs” (Lockhart, 1990, p. 9).

Determining the relationship between rigorous high school coursework and future college success seems to be the next logical path of inquiry. Significant amounts of research (College Board, 2006), confirms that students who score high on College Board AP exams are more likely to graduate from college in five years or less, viewed by some as an index of success. In addition, “AP students exempted from introductory college courses, including mathematics and science courses, earned higher course grades than students who took the introductory course on the college campus” (College Board, 2006, p. 1).

The relationship between college graduation rates and AP course participation, including the related exam, also appear to correlate well. For example, in a study of college graduation rates in Texas public colleges and universities, sixty four percent (64%) of students who passed an AP exam graduated from college within five years versus only 42% of those who did not pass (Dougherty, Mellor & Jian, 2005).

The various specialty course offerings available throughout secondary education pose many challenges for school administrators when they make attempts to evaluate and report student performance. Many students and parents have demanded that school administrators weight the grading system relative to the degree of course difficulty in

which more credit is given to rigorous courses. In many cases, weighted grading systems for such courses base student evaluation on a 5.0 scale rather than the traditional 4.0 scale. In these systems, additional points are added to the student's numeric grade based on the perceived difficulty of the course. In some cases, however, school districts use a multiplicative type of weighting system. While there appears to be no uniformity across systems as to the method used, the results appear to be the same – students who participate in such specialty or advanced curricula are often evaluated much differently than their non-honors peers. As such, students taking weighted courses are rewarded for their efforts with higher GPAs and class ranks (Lockhart, 1990).

It also has been noted that some students who challenge themselves by enrolling in advanced courses may be penalized for their decision by earning lower grades in unweighted grading systems. According to Attwell (cited in Sadler & Tai, 2007, p. 7): “enrolling in an AP or honors-level course can result in students earning a lower grade than they would in a standard-level course because more will be expected and higher performing students will be classmates.” Such students can quickly find their GPA and class rank are well below comparable students who remained in the regular classroom. According to Manzo (1998) “Andy Howard, who will be a senior at Greenwood Community High School near Indianapolis, IN, said his GPA has suffered for his decision to take honors English and calculus, which have earned him B’s. In his class of 200 students, Mr. Howard ranked 28th (p.1).” Thus, two of the most scrutinized measures that university recruiters have at their disposal, class rank and GPA, can be notably heightened, and at times potentially damaged, by student participation or nonparticipation

in honors courses through the district's selective use of weighted or unweighted grading systems.

According to Talley (1989) many parents and school administrators believe "students with weighted grades have a definite advantage in the college admission process" (p. 19). Further, studies by Talley and colleagues (Talley, 1989; Talley & Mohr, 1991) indicate that school systems that do not award weighted grades for challenging curricula can limit their students' post-secondary opportunities. In districts using an unweighted grading system, students might enroll in coursework equally as challenging as those who attend schools using weighted grades, yet they may not enjoy the potential advantages of higher GPA and class rank during the college admittance review.

The use of weighted grades in secondary education as a means to give credit for honors or advanced placement courses is common (Hawkins & Clinedinst, 2006). School districts tend to advocate for the use weighted grading systems based on two primary concerns. First, students, parents, and educators recognize that honors type courses are challenging and believe grade adjustment, based on course difficulty, is appropriate. Second, it is thought that if grade adjustments are not made; these students may leave secondary education with a lower GPA and class rank than students who pursue basic classes. According to Vickers (cited in Sadler & Tai, 2007, p. 7): "even a small disparity in GPA between candidates can mean the difference between acceptance and rejection by a college." Thus, unweighted grading practices may negatively impact student's ability to be admitted into selective post-secondary institutions.

Despite the body of evidence indicating substantial differences in grading practices occur in our nation's high schools and those grading systems have been found to affect the application process and admission decisions for prospective college students, little is known about the prevalence, practice, and perceptions of high school educators regarding the various high school grading systems in the United States. Given high school counselors have traditionally assisted students in the college application process (Hawkins & Clinedinst, 2006), it is important to gather information from these educators to further our knowledge in this area.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to examine the effects of weighted grading practice on post-secondary admissions. More specifically, the prevalence of weighted grading systems in secondary education and their demonstrated or perceived effect on post-secondary admissions is examined. If such effects can be identified, including the associated variables that make them either positive or negative, school district administrators, students and their parents would then be better prepared to make informed decisions regarding their use and probable impact on post-secondary admissions. The following research questions were derived to assess the use of weighted grading systems and their perceived impact on the college admissions process.

Research Questions

1. What is the prevalence of weighted grading systems?
2. How are weighted grading systems applied to secondary curriculum?
3. How are weighted grading systems derived?
4. Are weighted grades identified on student transcripts?

5. What is the perceived impact of weighted grades on post-secondary admissions?

Definition of Terms

Additive Systems – An arithmetic method of calculating weighted grades which involves the addition of points or letter grades to the base value.

Advanced Placement - Secondary education courses that allow students the opportunity to try out college-level work, develop valuable skills; and, with satisfactory scores on AP exams, earn credit or advanced standing in more than 1400 colleges and universities in the United States (College Board, 2004).

Class Rank – The ranking of students within a given class relative to their peers generally based on grade point average (GPA), letter grades, or the strength of courses taken.

Grade Point Average (GPA) - The arithmetic mean of the grade points earned in all courses taken by assigning a point value to each letter grade.

Multiplicative Systems – An arithmetic method of calculating weighted grades which involve multiplying the base value by a given amount.

Weighted Averages – “Weighting averages is a system of giving certain courses, such as AP or honors, a specific percentage increment of the base grade traditionally computed to form the unweighted average” (Talley & Mohr, 1991, p. 9).

Weighted Grades - A system of grading in which either a base grade is multiplied by a given amount (multiplicative type), or a given amount is added to the base value (additive type) to arrive at a weighted grade dependent on course difficulty (Nemecek, 1994).

Chapter II: Literature Review

The following literature review will begin by defining weighted grades. Next, the professional literature will be reviewed to determine what is currently known about the prevalence and practice of weighted grading systems. College and university admissions requirements then will be addressed, followed with an analysis of how weighted grades can affect the admission review process.

What are weighted grades?

According to Nemecek (1994), school systems that use the traditional grading system of A thru F, also assign to them grade point values of 4, 3, 2, 1, and 0. This is commonly known as the 4.0 GPA scale. “The addition of pluses and minuses awarded may expand the scale upward (e.g., A+ = 4.33)” (Sadler & Tai, 2007, p. 7). However, when school districts are faced with pressure by students, parents and teachers to increase the grade awards given for honors type courses, many districts find the traditional system too confining. To meet these demands, districts often use weighted grading systems to evaluate participating students on scales much different than students enrolled in standard curricula (Hawkins & Clinedinst, 2006). “Honors or advanced placement courses are often accounted for by grading on a higher scale (A = 5, B = 4, C = 3, D = 2, F = 1), or simply, “bonus” points are added to the grade appearing on the transcript” (Sadler & Tai, 2007, p. 7). Advocates for the use of a weighted scale is generally base their argument on the recognition that substantial effort is required for students to succeed in honors type courses; and, accordingly, the grades awarded should be commensurate with their level of difficulty. According to Dickason (1984):

“A grade of B in an honors type course should be treated as an A in college admissions, otherwise the student will be penalized in the selection process because those who take less rigorous courses will get higher grades, and will be selected over those who took the more rigorous courses.” (p. 1)

However, enrolling in honors type courses potentially can also result in students earning a lower grade as more will be expected of their performance as well as higher performing students will also be their classmates (Sadler & Tai, 2007).

“In view of these issues, the majority of high schools in the nation modify or “weight” their calculation of HSGPA (High School Grade Point Average) (Hawkins & Clinedinst, 2006). However, no standard scheme exists (Cognard, 1996; Dillon, 1986; Jones, 1975; National Research Council, 2002)” (cited in Sadler & Tai, 2007, p. 7).

Many forms of grade weighting are noted in the literature. The most basic form involves the award of a one-letter grade increase above what a student would normally earn using traditional grading practice. More recently, however, some schools have used more complex arithmetic weighting calculations based on either a multiplicative or additive system (Nemecek, 1994). According to Nemecek, the first column of such systems serves as the base grade from which subsequent levels derive their value by either multiplying the base by a given amount (multiplicative system), or a given amount is added to the base (additive system). In either system, the weighting factors used at each level are subjectively determined by the perceived complexity of specific courses. Prior to designing a multiplicative or additive system, the school district must first determine the number of grading levels required for their needs. These levels can be

applied to all courses, including those in special education, regular education; honors type courses, and gifted/talented programs.

According to Nemecek (1994), additive and multiplicative systems have distinct advantages and disadvantages. An advantage of the multiplicative system is that “the average of grades in each level is mathematically fair. For example, an A grade and an F grade average out to a C” (Nemecek, 1994, p.325). However, a primary disadvantage of the multiplicative system is that when similar grading practices are applied across levels, substantial grade fluctuation can be noted. For example, “A student can earn a higher weighted grade by moving to a lower level and obtaining one higher grade” (Nemecek, 1994, p. 326).

According to Nemecek (1994), an advantage of the additive system is that point values are equal across levels. The additive system eliminates the possibility of grade fluctuation. However, the primary disadvantage of the additive system is that the “F grade does not average fairly, mathematically exerting an extreme penalty in determining a grade average” (Nemecek, 1994, p. 326).

Possible variations of either system are numerous. Changing the values in the base column, adjusting the multiplicative or additive factors, or varying the number of available levels are all variants on the traditional grading system. All such changes can assist school districts in finding systems that best meet their needs.

It has been noted that implementing new grading systems within a district can be quite difficult. According to Perlstein (2004), when the Montgomery County (Washington D.C.) Board of Education elected to begin unifying its grading system based on academic standards, it was assumed that such changes could easily be understood and

implemented by district staff within one school year. After massive confusion by both parents and teachers, implementation was not only delayed, but also adjusted to slowly phase in the new grading system over a three-year period. “The gradual adoption is necessary, said Dale Fulton, associate superintendent for instruction, because you can’t really change the report card until you [staff] have a solid background on what a grade means” (p. B1).

Other disadvantages of weighted grading systems have been noted in the literature. One disadvantage centers on the inconsistency with which weighted grading systems are designed and implemented “often leading to confusion and seeming inequalities” from school district to school district (Manzo, 1998, p. 1). According to Riordan (cited in Manzo, 1998, p. 1): “Some schools don’t do any weighting, some weight certain courses, and some only weight classes in senior year. Their policies are all over the gamut.” As a result, “high school principals, guidance counselors, and college admissions counselors have been pushing for uniformity in grading policies” (Manzo, 1998, p. 2). Other disadvantages were noted by Talley and Mohr (1991) who stated that “a) weighting grades sometimes waters down a higher level course because students taking it are not truly capable of it and b) teachers sometimes respond by suppressing grades because they know the grades will be weighted in the end” (p. 9).

Prevalence of Weighted Grades

Dickason (1984) noted in a 1981 survey of Pennsylvania high schools that “about half [of Pennsylvania public schools] had honors type courses in their curriculums, and that virtually all of these schools weighted honors type courses in the process of calculating class rank (p. 1).” In a 1990 study of Maryland public schools, Lockhart

(1990) reported that twelve out of twenty-four Maryland counties were using some form of weighted grading system. According to Brice (2002), 15% of California's schools during the 1999-2000 school year had no advanced placement courses; and, consequently, no weighted grading systems. Conversely, 85% of California's schools implemented advanced placement courses and weighted grading systems during the same time period. Thus, those students in California schools without honors courses which use weighted grades may be at a distinct disadvantage as "AP [honors] courses can lift a students grade point average above other students who stick to regular high school classes" (Brice, 2002, p. 4). For this reason, the California legislative committee, empowered to create an educational master plan in 2002, began to investigate the possibility of ending of all weighted grading policies in California. The intent of this plan was to "do away with weighted grades that give some high school seniors a competitive edge when applying to college" (Brice, 2002, p. 2). The University of California Regents later voted this proposal down "because they believe students should have the motivation and the incentive to try and do better in their courses" (Brice, 2002, p. 2). However, enrolling in AP or honors courses can also potentially result in earning lower grades due to the high level of expectation versus basic courses consequently damaging future admission into selective colleges and universities (Capasso, 1995).

While not directly related to prevalence, Mitchell (1994) found in a 1994 survey of state heads of gifted education that 86% of the respondents indicated, "their public high schools were allowed to use weighted grades" (p. 29). Of these, all but Arkansas permitted their schools to design their own weighting procedures.

College Admission Requirements

While there are numerous elements personnel from post-secondary institutions use to evaluate applicants, much research has been devoted to determining the most important. Hawkins and Clinedinst (2006) determined in a 2006 National Association for College Admission Counseling report that grades in college preparatory courses, admission test scores (ACT, SAT), and overall grades remain the “top factors” in the college admission decision making process. While outlining the steps secondary students should take as they explore post-secondary education, Berger (1990) found that colleges look first at an applicant’s GPA, second at class rank, and third at academic rigor. According to Berger, student participation in honors type courses and their depth of study in foreign languages and mathematics were generally accepted as evidence of academic rigor. According to Miller, Rivell, and Walker (1991), “during the 1980s, increasing numbers of public universities began using GPA (grade point average) and RIC (rank-in-class) as standards to admission” (p. 15). Talley and Mohr (1991) concurred with Miller, Rivell, and Walker, by concluding from a survey of 202 public university and college directors of admission throughout the United States, that GPA (49%) and rank-in-class (28%) were the two primary measures such institutions use to judge applicants. Emphasis on such measures continues to grow in popularity on campuses across the United States. In a national survey of undergraduate admission policies, Breland, Maxey, Gernand, Cumming, and Trapani (2000) found that “high school GPA or rank was consistently the most important factor in admissions decisions between 1979 and 2000, and admissions test scores were consistently second in importance (p. 9).” Breland and colleagues also reported that admissions personnel from four-year private institutions

perceived that standards were higher in 2000 than for the five previous years, while acceptance rates continued to decrease over the same time period.

Weighted Grading Effects on Post-Secondary Admittance

Dickason (1984) calculated that the outcome of promoting honors type courses by adding one letter grade resulted in an increase of student GPA by .06 for each honors course completed. The cumulative effects of such increases could not only substantially impact a student's GPA and class rank, but also that student's potential for success in the selective post-secondary admittance process.

In an effort to better understand the effects of weighted grades in the post-secondary selection process, Talley (1989) randomly surveyed six hundred and one competitive private college admissions directors across the United States. These directors were sent two surveys, four weeks apart, in 1988. The first survey "investigated the philosophy of the admission directors from both a stated institutional and personal point of view" (Talley, 1989, p. 20). "The second survey was composed of two students' transcripts and a response card that contained one question requesting the admission director to choose one over another in a hypothetical admission decision" (Talley, 1989, p. 20). The transcripts included identical coursework; however, one transcript had been calculated using weighted averages for honors type courses, while the other reflected a traditional (unweighted) grading practice. Four hundred and eighty-seven admission directors responded to both surveys, results indicated 76.2% chose the student with the weighted average over the one without weighted grades. These data contradicted the results of the first survey based on the perceptions of the college admissions directors in

which “74.3% (430 respondents) indicated that institutional policy did not favor a student with a weighted average” (Talley, 1989, p. 21).

In a follow-up study, Talley and Mohr (1991) replicated the original Talley study (1989) by sending out surveys and transcripts to 202 competitive public colleges and universities. They also added to the original study by asking the admissions directors to: a) order in preference certain admissions measures, b) indicate whether computer prescreening is used at their institution in the admissions process, c) indicate if at their institution, grades are recalculated on transcripts reflecting weighted or unweighted methods, and d) indicate if their institution preferred a weighted average versus an unweighted average. The findings indicated that 34% used computer screening as a preadmission tool, 37% recomputed transcripts that were weighted to reflect unweighted practice, and 28% recomputed unweighted transcripts to reflect weighted practice. Most important was the finding that 61% of the public universities indicated they preferred a weighted transcript to an unweighted transcript. With regard to which transcript was chosen by these directors, the outcome was similar to the results of the 1989 study. Seventy two percent of respondents indicated that they believed “no preference is given to the student with the weighted average, yet the same time 72% chose the weighted applicant over the student with unweighted grades” (Talley & Mohr, 1991, p. 10).

According to Talley (1991), these results indicate that schools and districts that do not use weighted average grading may put students who take honors type courses at a distinct disadvantage in the competitive admissions process. Weighted grades appear to give such students the opportunity to increase their GPA and class rank, key elements in the post-secondary selection process.

Chapter III: Methodology

This chapter will describe the methodology used to conduct this study. A description of the subject selection, instrumentation and procedures for data analyses will be included.

Subject Selection and Description

The sample group for this research study consisted of practicing public and private school counselors from across the United States. The participants were selected from a directory of high school level counselors provided through the American School Counselor Association (ASCA). Five hundred and four public and private school counselors who were members of ASCA as of March 2005 were selected to receive the survey. Following the selection process, each participant was mailed a 15-minute, 12 item survey. The respondents were asked to complete and return the survey in the supplied pre-addressed and stamped envelope. Those participants who did not respond to the initial mailing were sent a follow-up letter, another survey and a return envelope. The letter stressed the importance of their input and requested their response.

Participants

Of the 504 surveys distributed over two mailings, a total of 251 were returned for data analysis. The returned surveys represent an overall return rate of 49.8%. As evidenced by the demographic data in Table 1, the majority of the respondents were female, Caucasian, employed full time and were members of their state's school counselor association. Nearly all (90.8%) were reported to be members of the American School Counselor Association (ASCA), and 46.6% indicated they worked within suburban school districts. The most frequent level of education reported was Master's

degree plus 32 or more credits. Most (99.6%) indicated they were not members of the American Psychological Association (APA), and most (86.5%) reported they were not nationally certified school counselors. Respondents from 46 states, including representation from all geographic regions, are represented in the data. A detailed summary of counselor's demographic characteristics is provided in Table 1, located in Appendix D.

Instrumentation

A twelve item questionnaire was developed specifically for use in this research study (see Appendix C). This instrument included items focused on the use of weighted grading systems in the respondents respective district, their perceptions of the effects weighted grades have on the educational success of students, and demographic information specific to each respondent.

Item one asked respondents if weighted grading systems were currently used in their school districts. Item two asked respondents to indicate the type of courses weighted grading systems are applied to. Item three asked respondents how weighted grading systems were derived in their districts. Items four and five asked respondents if students needed to meet certain requirements for enrollment in courses in which weighted grades were used and as an estimation of the overall number of courses with weighted grades. Items six, seven and eight asked respondents: how weighted grades were reported on transcripts, if class rank was included on student transcripts; and, if so, how class rank was calculated. Items nine, ten and eleven asked respondents to share their opinions regarding the perceived advantage, equity and overall use of weighted grade systems. The final item asked respondents to answer demographic questions. The

demographic items included questions pertaining to the respondent's gender, age, ethnicity, training university, level of education, employment status, years of experience, student/counselor ratio in the school, affiliations with professional organizations, national certification status, grade level(s) in the employment setting, the state of employment, and a description of the district (i.e., urban, suburban or rural).

Data Collection Procedures

Each participant received a mailing including both a cover letter as well as the four-page questionnaire. The cover letter included information stressing the importance of the research, as well assurances of respondent confidentiality. Anonymity was protected through the use of a numeric code applied only to the pre-addressed and stamped return envelope, not to the survey itself. The code was applied to allow for follow-up mailings, yet did not disclose the identity of individual respondents. After the follow-up mailings were returned, all coded envelopes were destroyed.

A total of two mailings were conducted to complete this research. Of the 504 surveys mailed in the initial mailing in April of 2005, 184 were returned to the researcher for data analysis. One month later, a second mailing was sent to participants who did not respond to the initial mailing. Of these, an additional 67 were returned to the researcher. The total response brought the number returned to 251, representing an overall return rate of 49.8%.

Data Analysis

This study addressed five research questions pertaining to the use and practice of weighted grading systems in high school settings. To answer research question one, "What is the prevalence of weighted grading systems," descriptive data from item one

was used to identify common practice among the research sample. In addition, data from item five was used to identify the percentage of courses within each district in which weighted grading systems were applied. To answer research question two, “How are weighted grading systems applied to high school courses,” the domains in item two were ranked from highest to lowest, thereby identifying the frequency in which specific types of courses were weighted. To answer research question three, “How are weighted grades derived,” the domains in item three were ranked from highest to lowest, thereby identifying the frequency, in order or preference, of the different methods of calculating weighted grades. To answer research question four, “Are weighted grades identified on student transcripts,” the domains in item six were ranked from highest to lowest, thereby allowing the researcher to identify the practice most commonly implemented by those in the research sample. Finally, to answer research question five, “What is the perceived impact of weighted grades on post-secondary admissions,” domain data from items nine and ten were ranked from highest to lowest. This procedure allowed the researcher to identify counselor perceptions of the advantages and equity of weighted grading practices for specific groups of high school students.

Chapter IV: Results

This chapter will discuss the results related to the five research questions. Each question will be introduced along with the data specific to its particular area of interest.

What is the prevalence of weighted grading systems?

To determine the prevalence of weighted grading systems within the sample group, school counselors were asked to respond either “yes” or “no” whether any such system(s) were used in the district(s) in which they practice. One-hundred and ninety of the 251 respondents (75.7%) indicated some form of weighted grading system was in place in their district(s), while 61(24.3%) indicated their school used no form of weighted grading system. To determine the percentage of courses within each district that had some form of weighted grading system applied, counselors were asked to “estimate the percentage of courses that are weighted.” Based on the frequency of response, many (i.e., 53) indicated 10 percent or less of their courses were weighted (see Tables 2 & 3 in Appendix D for further frequency data).

How are weighted grading systems applied to secondary curriculum?

To determine how weighted grading systems are applied in high schools, counselors were asked to indicate all types of courses in which such grading systems were applied. Course type choices provided on the survey included: AP courses, Honors/Enriched courses, Junior/Senior courses only, and “Other.” More than 90% (91.6%) of respondents indicated weighted grading systems were applied to AP courses. Slightly more than 75% (75.3%) indicated weighted grading systems were applied to Honors/Enriched courses. Twenty percent indicated weighted grading systems were applied to “Other” courses. More than 4% (4.7%) indicated that weighted grading

systems were applied to Junior/Senior courses (see Table 4 in Appendix D for further information).

How are weighted grading systems derived?

To determine how weighted grades were derived, counselors were asked to specify the method their district use to calculate weighted grades. Methods provided on this list included: Additive systems, Multiplicative systems, Dependent on course, or “Other.” Slightly more than 75% (75.3%) of respondents indicated an Additive system was used to calculate weighted grades in their district. Slightly more than 15% (15.3%) indicated a Multiplicative system was used to calculate weighted grades in their school. More than 6% (6.8%) indicated an “Other” form of calculation was used in their districts to calculate weighted grades. Finally, slightly more than 2% (2.1%) of respondents indicated the method used to calculate weighted grades in their districts depended on the course (see Table 5 in Appendix D for further information).

Are weighted grades identified on student transcripts?

To determine if weighted grades were identified on student transcripts, counselors were asked to identify the practice commonly used in their district by selecting from a list of four options. Response options included: Grades/courses identified as weighted, Grades/courses unidentified as weighted, Transcript reports both weighted and un-weighted grades, and “Other.” Nearly 39% (38.7%) of respondents reported that the high school transcripts within their districts reported both weighted and un-weighted grades. Slightly more than 31% (31.2%) of respondents reported that grades in weighted courses were identified as weighted on student transcripts. Slightly more than 18% (18.3%) of respondents reported that grades in weighted courses were unidentified on student

transcripts. Finally, nearly 12% (11.8%) reported that some “Other” form of weighted grade identification was used on student transcripts in their districts (see Table 6 in Appendix D for further information).

What is the perceived impact of weighted grades on post-secondary admissions?

To determine the perceived impact weighted grade practices have on post-secondary admissions, high school counselors were asked to indicate their level of agreement as to whether such grading systems provide an advantage to each of four distinct subgroups of high school students. Using a Likert scale, respondents were asked to indicate whether they strongly disagreed, disagreed, were neutral, agreed, strongly agreed or were unsure if weighting grades provided an advantage to each of the following groups of high school students: College Bound Students, General Education Students, Gifted and Talented Students, or Students with Disabilities. Slightly more than 83% (83.2%) of respondents indicated they either strongly agreed or agreed that weighted grade practice provided an advantage to College Bound Students. Nearly 80% (79.1%) indicated they either strongly agreed or agreed that weighted grade practice provided an advantage to Gifted and Talented students. Thirty and one half percent (30.5%) indicated they either strongly agreed or agreed that weighted grade practice provided an advantage to General Education Students. More than 17% (17.4%) indicated they either strongly agreed or agreed that weighted grade practice provides an advantage to Students with Disabilities (see Tables 7 - 10 in Appendix D for further information).

Additionally, respondents were also asked to indicate their perceptions of fairness regarding weighted grading practices on the same subgroups of high school students. Using a Likert scale, respondents were asked to indicate whether they strongly disagreed,

disagreed, were neutral, agreed, strongly agreed or were unsure if weighted grade practice was fair for each of the following groups of high school students: College Bound Students, General Education Students, Gifted and Talented students, or Students with Disabilities. Slightly more than 78% (78.1%) indicated they either strongly agreed or agreed that weighted grade practice was fair for College Bound Students. More than 76% (76.3%) indicated they either strongly agreed or agreed that weighted grade practice was fair for Gifted and Talented Students. More than 53% (53.4%) indicated they either strongly agreed or agreed that weighted grade practice was fair for General Education students. More than 33% (33.4%) of respondents of respondents indicated they either strongly agreed or agreed that weighted grade practice was fair for Students with Disabilities (see Tables 11 – 14 in Appendix D for further information).

Chapter V: Discussion

The focus of this research study was to explore the use of weighted grade systems in high schools across the United States. Areas of investigation included the prevalence of weighted grading practice, how weighted grades are applied within the high school curriculum, how weighted grading systems are derived, whether weighted grades are identified on student transcripts and the perceived impact weighted grades have on the post-secondary admissions process. Former studies have determined substantial differences in grading practices occur in our nation's high schools and those grading systems have been found to affect the application process and admission decisions for prospective college students. However, little is known about the prevalence, practice, and perceptions of high school educators regarding the use and practice of weighted grading systems in the United States.

Noteworthy Results

Results of this study reveal the use of weighted grading systems is prevalent in high schools within the United States. However, within the schools that practice their use, weighted grades are commonly applied to only 10 to 20% of the curriculum. More specific findings, as well as weighted grade implications to school districts and students, will be presented in the following sections based on the research questions designed for this research.

What is the prevalence of weighted grading systems?

This first research question sought to determine the frequency of weighted grading systems among high schools across the United States. More than 75% (75.7%) of respondents indicated that some form of weighted grading system was in use within

their respective districts. While no previous comparable data could be found relative to nationwide practice, results of this study appear to be consistent with Brice (2002) who found that 85% of California's schools implemented weighted grading systems within advanced placement courses. This data also appears to concur with Mitchell (1994) who found that 86% of public high school gifted and talented programs implemented weighted grades. Additionally, Dickason (1984) found approximately half of Pennsylvania high schools offered honors type courses, and virtually all of those were assigned weighted grades.

How are weighted grading systems applied to secondary curriculum?

The second research question sought to determine how weighted grades are applied within the high school curriculum. Consistent with research conducted by Hawkins and Clinedinst (2006) and Sadler and Tai (2007), this research concluded Advanced Placement and Honors type courses are most commonly weighted.

Junior/Senior and "Other" courses were selected by only 24.7% of respondents indicating the practice of weighted grades in high schools appears to be focused on specialized or challenging courses, not to the general education curriculum.

How are weighted grading systems derived?

The third research question sought to determine what system high schools use to calculate weighted grades. More than 75% (75.3%) of respondents indicated additive systems are used within their respective districts to calculate weighted grades.

Multiplicative and other systems were identified by only 24.2% of respondents. This is an important finding as no other published literature investigated how weighted grades are commonly derived in schools across our nation.

Are weighted grades identified on student transcripts?

The fourth research question sought to determine if high schools identify weighted grades on student transcripts. Responses to this area of inquiry were mixed. Findings indicated both “Identified as Weighted” and “Weighted & Un-Weighted” options were chosen nearly equally by respondents in this investigation. Combined, these choices made up 69.9% of all respondents who answered this item on the questionnaire. As such, it appears that more than two thirds of respondents’ districts identified weighted grades on their student transcripts. Given no previous data relevant to this area of inquiry was found in the published literature, these findings need to be replicated.

What is the perceived impact of weighted grades on post-secondary admissions?

The fifth research question sought to determine high school counselors’ perceptions regarding the impact weighted grades have on the post-secondary admissions process. To gain further understanding within this area of inquiry, two questionnaire items were presented to participants.

The first item asked respondents to indicate, from their perspective, if the practice of weighted grades provided an advantage to four differing groups of high school students. Respondents overwhelmingly indicated that both “College Bound” and “Gifted and Talented” students are advantaged by the practice of weighted grades. Conversely, respondents indicated that weighted grades provide little advantage to “General Education” or “Students with Disabilities.” These findings appear to be consistent with the findings of Talley and colleagues (1989; 1991) who found that college and universities were more likely to admit students with weighted transcripts over those with unweighted transcripts.

The second item asked respondents to indicate, from their perspective, if the practice of weighted grades was fair to the same four groups of high school students. The majority of respondents indicated that the practice of weighted grades was fair for both “College Bound” and “Gifted and Talented students.” While not as strong, respondents also appeared to perceive that weighted grades were fair for “General Education” students. Conversely, respondents notably did not believe weighted grades were fair for “Students with Disabilities.” Throughout the literature review, no previous data relevant to the area of perceived fairness for various student groups was found.

Limitations

The primary limitations of this study can be defined within three areas. First, the current findings regarding weighted grade practice from high school counselors across the United States relied primarily on subjective opinion rather than on hard data. As such, definitive conclusions about weighted grade practice cannot be made. Second, the time-line between data collection, analysis and dissemination in the form of this thesis approached three years. This length of time calls into question the validity and relevance this research can have on current practice and attitudes toward grading practices. Third, the fifth research question sought to determine the impact weighted grades have on post-secondary admissions. This research did not directly answer this question. As such, all that can be determined from the data is an inference of what this data can potentially mean for students who seek admission to post-secondary institutions.

Implications for Research

As noted above, this research does not directly address the impact weighted grade practices have on post-secondary admissions. The respondents merely shared their

perceptions with regard to the potential advantages and fairness of weighted grades for high school students. In addition, the knowledge gained through this research is exclusively based on the subjective opinion from one group of educational professionals.

The resulting implications on further research point to the need for more direct inquiry into the effects weighted grades have on post-secondary admissions. Quantitative as well as qualitative data should be gathered to gain a more clear understanding of the effects weighted grades have on student success. Finally, this area of inquiry should also include more than just one group of stakeholders' perceptions. Educational professionals from both secondary and post-secondary institutions, as well as students and their parents, will all need to be assessed with regard to the effects and perceived advantages or disadvantages of weighted grading practices.

Implications for Practice

Consistent with previous research by Lockhart (1990), this research also concludes that students who participate in specialty or advanced curricula are often evaluated much differently than peers who do not enroll in such courses. Students who take specialty or advanced courses more often than not are evaluated using weighted grades. According to Lockhart (1990), students taking weighted courses are often rewarded for their efforts with higher GPAs and class ranks, the two of the most important factors in the college admissions process (Breland, Maxey, Gernand, Cumming, and Trapani, 2000). However, previous research by Sadler and Tai (2007) demonstrated that students who enroll in honors type courses can also earn a lower grade due to the higher levels of expectations these courses provide. Consequently, these students' GPAs and class ranks, as well as their likelihood of acceptance by selective

post-secondary institutions, can be negatively affected. In an attempt to account for this negative impact, high schools across the nation often modify or weight their GPA calculation through the use of weighted grades (Hawkins & Clinedinst, 2006). As such, educators, students and parents need to be fully informed with regard to the potential positive or negative impact unweighted and weighted courses can have on students' potential for admittance into selective colleges and universities.

Summary

In this study, the perceptions of a national sample of high school counselors about the prevalence and effects of weighted grading systems were investigated through survey research. Results of this research indicate the vast majority of high schools across the United States use weighted grades in 10 to 20% of their courses offerings. Weighted grades are most commonly applied to Honors or Advanced Placement courses. To calculate weighted grades, the vast majority of high schools tend to use additive systems over any other forms of calculation. In addition, weighted grades tend to be identified as such on student transcripts, thereby giving post-secondary institutions the opportunity to more make informed admittance decisions.

Weighted grades were perceived to be most fair and advantageous for College-Bound and Gifted and Talented students. Given previous research that concluded GPA and class rank are the factors most commonly used in their admissions decisions, combined with research that concluded weighted grades tend to increased both factors, it can be concluded though this new research that high school counselors view weighted grades as a positive influence on the post-secondary admissions process for most college-bound students.

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Appendix A: Cover Letter and Informed Consent

April, 2005

Dear School Counselor:

You have been randomly selected to participate in a university study involving the use of weighted grades. As a school counselor, your perceptions related to this topic are important. The data collected from this survey will be used in the completion of my Education-Specialist thesis at the University of Wisconsin Stout.

While your participation in this research is completely voluntary, I hope you understand the importance of further knowledge in this area. If you choose not to participate, please indicate this on the survey and return it in the enclosed return envelope. However, if you do choose to participate, be assured that all responses will be treated with confidentiality, and only group results will be reported.

Your participation in this research would be greatly appreciated, and I want to thank you in advance for contributing 10 minutes of your time. Should you have any further questions or comments, please feel free to call me at 715-720-1294, or my thesis advisor, Dr. Jacalyn Weissenburger, at 715-232-1326.

Sincerely,

Charles W. Norton, M.S. Ed.

Informed Consent:

I understand that by completing this questionnaire, I am giving my informed consent as a participant in this study. I understand the basic nature of the study and agree that any potential risks in relation to my participation are minimal. I also understand that this information is being gathered in a specific manner requiring only minimal identifiers, and that my confidentiality is guaranteed. I further realize that I have the right to refuse participation in the study at any time, and am aware that the data collected will be reported on a group basis only. Questions or concerns regarding participation in this study should first be addressed to the researcher, Charles W. Norton, and/or thesis advisor, Dr. Jacalyn Weissenburger, and secondly to the following:

Sue Foxwell, Human Protections Administrator
UW-Stout Institutional Review Board for the Protection of Human Subjects in Research
152 Vocational Rehabilitation Building, Menomonie, WI 54751, (715) 232-1126

Appendix B: *Follow-up Letter*

May, 2005

Dear School Counselor:

Last month, you were asked to complete a survey regarding the use of weighted grades. To the best of my knowledge, I have not yet received a completed survey from you. I realize you may not have had time to fill out the survey last month, yet I am hoping you could take the time today.

While your participation in this research is completely voluntary, I hope you understand the importance of further knowledge in this area. If you choose not to participate, please indicate this on the survey and return it in the enclosed return envelope. However, if you do chose to participate, be assured that all responses will be treated with confidentiality, and only group results will be reported.

Your participation in this research would be greatly appreciated, and I want to thank you in advance for contributing 10 minutes of your time. Should your have any further questions or comments, please feel free to call me at 715-720-1294, or my thesis advisor, Dr. Jacalyn Weissenburger, at 715-232-1326.

Sincerely,

Charles W. Norton, M.S. Ed.

Informed Consent:

I understand that by completing this questionnaire, I am giving my informed consent as a participant in this study. I understand the basic nature of the study and agree that any potential risks in relation to my participation are minimal. I also understand that this information is being gathered in a specific manner requiring only minimal identifiers, and that my confidentiality is guaranteed. I further realize that I have the right to refuse participation in the study at any time, and am aware that the data collected will be reported on a group basis only. Questions or concerns regarding participation in this study should first be addressed to the researcher, Charles W. Norton, and/or thesis advisor, Dr. Jacalyn Weissenburger, and secondly to the following:

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152 Vocational Rehabilitation Building, Menomonie, WI 54751, (715) 232-1126

Appendix C: *Survey*

SCHOOL COUNSELOR WEIGHTED GRADING SYSTEM SURVEY

- 1) Does your school or district use a Weighted Grading system?
(e.g., extra points applied to AP, Honors or Enriched courses)
- ☐ Yes ☐ No

If Yes, continue with item #2

If No, continue with item #11

- 2) In your school or district, Weighted Grading systems are applied to (check all that apply):
- ☐ AP Courses
 - ☐ Honors/Enriched courses
 - ☐ Junior/Senior courses only
 - ☐ Other _____

- 3) In your school or district, how are Weighted Grading systems derived?
- ☐ Additive system (the addition of a specified # of points)
 - ☐ Multiplicative system (a multiplication factor)
 - ☐ It depends on the course
 - ☐ Other _____

- 4) In your school or district, do students need to meet certain criteria for enrollment in AP, Honors, or Enriched courses?
- ☐ Yes
- ☐ No

If yes, explain.

- 5) In your school or district, please estimate the percentage of courses that are Weighted.
- _____ %

- 6) In your school or district, how are student grades in Weighted courses reported on student transcripts?
- ☐ Grades/courses identified as Weighted
 - ☐ Grades/courses are unidentified as Weighted
 - ☐ Transcript reports both Weighted & Un-Weighted Grades
 - ☐ Other _____

Survey continued on next page

- 7) Does your school or district report Class Rank on student transcripts?
☐ Yes
☐ No (**proceed to question #9**)
- 8) In your school or district, Class Rank is calculated based on _____?
☐ Weighted and Un-Weighted Grades as reported on transcript
☐ Un-Weighted Grades only (excluding Weighted courses)
☐ Un-Weighted Grades only (Weighted Grades are recalculated as Un-Weighted)
☐ Other _____
- 9) In your opinion, Weighted Grading systems provide an **advantage** to (please respond to each group below):

College bound students

(circle one)

Strongly Disagree / Disagree / Neutral / Agree / Strongly Agree / Unsure
1 2 3 4 5 6

General education students

(circle one)

Strongly Disagree / Disagree / Neutral / Agree / Strongly Agree / Unsure
1 2 3 4 5 6

Gifted & talented students

(circle one)

Strongly Disagree / Disagree / Neutral / Agree / Strongly Agree / Unsure
1 2 3 4 5 6

Students with disabilities

(circle one)

Strongly Disagree / Disagree / Neutral / Agree / Strongly Agree / Unsure
1 2 3 4 5 6

- 10) In your opinion, Weighted Grading systems are **fair** for (please respond to each group below):

College bound students

(circle one)

Strongly Disagree / Disagree / Neutral / Agree / Strongly Agree / Unsure
1 2 3 4 5 6

General education students

(circle one)

Strongly Disagree / Disagree / Neutral / Agree / Strongly Agree / Unsure
1 2 3 4 5 6

Survey continued on next page

Gifted & talented students

(circle one)

Strongly Disagree / Disagree / Neutral / Agree / Strongly Agree / Unsure

1 2 3 4 5 6

Students with disabilities

(circle one)

Strongly Disagree / Disagree / Neutral / Agree / Strongly Agree / Unsure

1 2 3 4 5 6

- 11) In your opinion, do you think some high school courses should be weighted?

☐ Yes☐ No

If yes, please provide a brief explanation of why.

- 12) Demographic Information:

-Gender: ☐ Male ☐ Female

-Age: _____ years old

-Ethnicity: <input type="checkbox"/>	White/Caucasian	<input type="checkbox"/>	Black African American
<input type="checkbox"/>	Asian American	<input type="checkbox"/>	Pacific Islander
<input type="checkbox"/>	Native American	<input type="checkbox"/>	Hispanic/Latino
<input type="checkbox"/>	Other _____		

-Number of years as a school counselor: _____ years

-Highest degree held: ☐ M.S. ☐ M.S. +12 ☐ M.S. +30 ☐ Ed.S. ☐ Ph.D.

-Graduate school and state of training: _____

-Employment status: ☐ full time ☐ part time

-Counselor to student ratio in your school or district:

☐ 1-250 ☐ 251-500 ☐ 501-750 ☐ 750 +

- Are you a member of any of the following professional organizations (check all that apply)?

☐ Your state's school counseling association☐ ACA ☐ ASCA ☐ APA ☐ Other _____

-Are you a nationally certified school counselor?

☐ Yes☐ No

-What grade levels do you serve?

- ☐ K-5 ☐ Middle school/Junior High
☐ High School ☐ K-12

-Please characterize the type of school district in which you work:

- ☐ Urban ☐ Suburban ☐ Rural

-In what state do you work as a school counselor? _____

Thank you for completing this survey!

Appendix D: *Tables*

Table 1

School Counselor Demographics (N = 251)

Characteristics	<i>n</i>	%
Gender		
Male	59	23.9
Female	187	74.5
Not Specified	5	2.0
Ethnicity		
White/Caucasian	223	88.8
African American	10	4.0
Asian American	3	1.2
Hispanic/Latino	6	2.4
Multi-Racial	1	.4
Other	2	.8
Not Specified	6	2.4
Highest Degree Held		
Master's	69	27.5
Master's + 12 cr.	41	16.3
Master's + 30/32 cr.	108	43.0
Specialist	17	6.8
Doctorate	10	4.0
Other/Not Specified		2.4
Employment Status		
Fulltime	236	94.0
Part-Time	6	2.4
Not Specified	9	3.6

Characteristics	<i>n</i>	%
<hr/>		
Counselor-to-Student Ratio		
1 - 250	64	25.5
251 - 500	149	59.4
501 - 750	30	12.0
751 or more	4	1.6
Not Specified	4	1.6
Members of State's Association		
Yes/Checked	181	72.1
No/Not Checked	70	27.9
ACA Member		
Yes/Checked	82	32.7
No/Not Checked	169	67.3
ASCA Member		
Yes/Checked	228	90.8
No/Not Checked	23	9.2
APA Member		
Yes/Checked	1	.4
No/Not Checked	250	99.6
Nationally Certified School Counselor		
Yes	30	12.0
No	217	86.5
Not Specified	4	1.6

Characteristics	<i>n</i>	%
Type of School District		
Urban	76	30.3
Suburban	117	46.6
Rural	54	21.5
Not Specified.	4	1.6
Region		
Northeast	79	31.5
South	75	29.9
Midwest	35	13.9
West	62	24.7

Table 2

Does School District Use A Weighted Grading System? (N = 251)

Answer	<i>n</i>	%
Yes	190	75.7
No	61	24.3

Table 3

Percentage of Weighted Courses (N = 158)

Percent of Courses	<i>n</i>	%
10 or Less	53	21.2
11 – 20	40	16.0
21 – 30	27	10.8
31 – 40	16	6.4
41 – 50	5	2.0
51 – 60	1	.4
61 – 70	4	1.6
71 – 80	4	1.6
81 – 90	1	..4
91 – 100	7	2.8

Table 4

Application of Weighted Grades (N = 190)

	<i>n</i>	%
AP Courses	174	91.6
Honors/Enriched Courses	143	75.3
Other Courses	38	20.0
Junior/Senior Courses	9	4.7

Table 5

Derivation of Weighted Grades (N = 190)

	<i>n</i>	%
Additive System	143	75.3
Multiplicative System	29	15.3
Other System	13	6.8
Dependent on Course	4	2.1

Table 6

Identification of Weighted Grades (N = 186)

	<i>n</i>	%
Identified as Weighted	58	31.2
Unidentified as Weighted	34	18.3
Weighted & Un-Weighted	72	38.7
Other	22	11.8

Table 7

Perceived Advantage of Weighted Grades on Post-Secondary Admissions for College Bound Students (N = 179)

	<i>n</i>	%
Strongly Disagree	8	4.5
Disagree	9	5.0
Neutral	13	7.3
Agree	50	27.9
Strongly Agree	99	55.3

Table 8

Perceived Advantage of Weighted Grades on Post-Secondary Admissions for General Education Students (N=170)

	<i>n</i>	%
Strongly Disagree	18	10.6
Disagree	47	27.6
Neutral	53	31.2
Agree	39	22.9
Strongly Agree	13	7.6

Table 9

Perceived Advantage of Weighted Grades on Post-Secondary Admissions for Gifted/Talented Students (N=172)

	<i>n</i>	%
Strongly Disagree	9	5.2
Disagree	8	4.7
Neutral	19	11.0
Agree	44	25.6
Strongly Agree	92	53.5

Table 10

Perceived Advantage of Weighted Grades on Post-Secondary Admissions for Students with Disabilities (N=167)

	<i>n</i>	%
Strongly Disagree	28	16.8
Disagree	58	34.7
Neutral	52	31.1
Agree	23	13.8
Strongly Agree	6	3.6

Table 11
Perceptions of Fairness for College Bound Students (N=178)

	<i>n</i>	%
Strongly Disagree	15	8.4
Disagree	7	3.9
Neutral	17	9.6
Agree	64	36.0
Strongly Agree	75	42.1

Table 12
Perceptions of Fairness for General Education Students (N=176)

	<i>n</i>	%
Strongly Disagree	16	9.1
Disagree	28	15.9
Neutral	38	21.6
Agree	62	35.2
Strongly Agree	32	18.2

Table 13

Perceptions of Fairness for Gifted/Talented Students (N=173)

	<i>n</i>	%
Strongly Disagree	10	4.0
Disagree	6	2.4
Neutral	25	10.0
Agree	59	23.5
Strongly Agree	73	29.1

Table 14

Perceptions of Fairness for Students with Disabilities (N=162)

	<i>n</i>	%
Strongly Disagree	15	6.0
Disagree	47	18.7
Neutral	46	18.3
Agree	38	15.1
Strongly Agree	16	6.4